

51hh- Guided Contemplation - At The Old Guards Cave

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

(A Summarised Transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

Meditation/*Bhāvanā*, the mental development that the Buddha taught, is about the cultivation of understanding or wisdom. A practitioner, therefore, should not be looking for some kind of special novelty experience, but instead should be looking for clarity in terms of understanding, which if done rightly, will result in freedom from suffering and peace.

It doesn't matter if you meditate for 10-15 minutes or a dedicated five hours a day. What matters is that that time is spent towards establishing the mind in clarity in regard to the nature of experience, i.e developing wisdom. That's also why instruction is necessary. If you don't know what to look for, if you don't know what to discern, you won't find it by yourself. Even as far as a 'guided meditation' goes, it should be guiding you towards understanding.

Let's say that a person wants to settle their mind, without falling into some kind of mystical absorption, and without over rationalising either, the first thing that needs to be done is physical solitude, being physically removed from other people. Far enough to not hear them, far enough to not see them, far enough to not feel that you can be encroached upon by them at any given time. Secluded and remote. Once you are secluded and remote, ask yourself, "What is the goal of the practice? What is my specific purpose? What am I trying to achieve? Am I after happiness? Am I after peace? Am I after freedom from suffering?" Whatever the answer may be, it should be made clear that the experience of peace or happiness, etc, will not be given to you. That experience needs to be cultivated and you can only develop that peace, freedom from suffering, happiness and wisdom by knowing how you're supposed to develop it. That is why the Buddha said, a person should go and visit those who are wise. Then reflect upon what he has heard and measure the task.

"Bhikkhus, I do not say that final knowledge is achieved all at once. On the contrary, final knowledge is achieved by gradual training, by gradual practice, by gradual progress."

"And how is final knowledge achieved by gradual training, gradual practice, gradual progress? Here one who has faith in a teacher visits him; when he visits him, he pays respect to him; when he pays respect to him, he gives ear; one who gives ear hears the Dhamma; having heard the Dhamma, he memorises it; he examines the meaning of the teachings he has memorised; when he examines their meaning, he gains a reflective acceptance of those teachings; when he has gained a reflective acceptance of those teachings, zeal springs up in him; when zeal has sprung up, he applies his will; having applied his will, he scrutinises; having scrutinised, he strives; resolutely striving, he realises with the body the supreme truth and sees it by penetrating it with wisdom."

-Mn70

All the tools for freedom from suffering are already contained within your experiences as a whole, within the five aggregates. As the Buddha said, the reason for suffering is craving, and the reason for freedom from suffering is the extinguishing of craving. Craving is not to be found elsewhere. It's not in things you crave for. It's not in things you're attached to. It's not in things that you find dear and pleasing. It's not in the world. It's not in the object of your senses. It's not in the object of your attention. It's in your attitude towards things that you can attend, perceive and engage with. If you were to remove that craving, gradually, if you were to stop feeding it, if you were to allow it to fade away through non-maintenance. Then the result is freedom from suffering within this very present experience as a whole. Right now.

That non-maintenance is developed and discerned when you realise that you can't maintain it, even if you want to, when you realise that the very foundation of your own life is not in your own control, you have no say in it, your life is secondary to it, your choices that you've been making are secondary to it. And that's nothing other than impermanence that the Buddha was talking about.

Once you have gone to a secluded place, away from people, it will take some time for the mind to settle into that solitude. Whenever that is, without overdoing it, without over attending it, try to start regarding yourself as part of that non-inhabited setup, for example, being a part of that remote forest, cave, root of the tree, the empty hut, wherever you might be. There are trees, there are rocks, there are rivers, there are waterfalls, there is this body there as well. There are monkeys, there are birds, there are snakes, there is this body there as well. You are not separate from it. There is this cave here, the huge tree trunks, broken trees, broken rocks, mountains and so on. Your body is actually 'closer' to those things than to your point of view. Your body belongs to these rocks and trees and forests, mountains and so on 'belongs' as in, it is made of the same elements. The whole 'your' of 'your body', is completely gratuitous. The only reason you can regard your body as yours is because there is something to be regarded as mine. And that something precedes your ownership, and that's what you're either reminding yourself of or discerning for the first time, doesn't matter. The solitary setup, free from people, free from disturbances where you are alone, you start to see that your own point of view is incidental in the grand scheme of things, the grand scheme of things of the entire four great elements, the mountains, the forests that you are in. Your body shares that nature, your body is the same. Which means as huge as these rocks are, you can see that even they break down, split and crumble. What then is to be said about this human body which is quite soft in comparison. If the granite mountains cannot escape the gradual destruction what is to be said about this very soft body.

Such a thought is not for the purpose of some kind of poetic indulgence. No, these reflections are about undermining your very own sense of existence, which is your very own sense of control, mastery and ownership. And it's not necessarily going to be pleasant, especially not if it's discerned for the first time. These things are frightening for those who still want to hold on to their appropriated point of view, as the owner of the body and so on. That's why you have to 'learn' how to find peace in it. It's not really an option. Fear is optional. You don't have to fear it. But you will automatically fear it. If it contradicts your point of view of ownership, which you're refusing to let go of. You have to gradually undermine your own sense of ownership whereby, even the fear cannot be owned. But you do have to accept it first.

"What, friends, is the earth element? The earth element may be either internal or external. What is the internal earth element? Whatever internally, belonging to oneself, is solid, solidified, and appropriated; that is, head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, contents of the stomach, feces, or whatever else internally, belonging to oneself, is solid, solidified, and appropriated: this is called the internal earth element. Now both the internal earth element and the external earth element are simply earth element. And that should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' When one sees it thus as it actually is with proper wisdom, one becomes disenchanted with the earth element and makes the mind dispassionate toward the earth element.

"Now there comes a time when the water element is disturbed and then the external earth element vanishes. When even this external earth element, great as it is, is seen to be impermanent, subject to destruction, disappearance, and change, what of this body, which is appropriated by craving and lasts but a while? There can be no consideration of that as 'I' or 'mine' or 'I am.' " - [Mn28](#)

So this very body, six feet tall, surrounded by wilderness, belongs to the wilderness, that belongs to the great planet earth, that belongs to a complete set of its own laws and circumstances and accidents, and change of elements and so on. Which means not even a tiny grain of this human body can be mine or can obey me. The beating heart, the muscle that pumps the blood completely involuntarily, is like these rivers flowing here, the trees growing and so on, but if something little changes, those great things will be gone. What is to say, for a little inferior, tiny muscle in your chest, that pumps blood that keeps you alive. Or your lungs being able to breathe, the movement of the wind in this forest, the movement of the wind on the mountain, the movement of the wind within this body.

That's why the Buddha would talk about these things in the suttas, because you are to reflect on it so that you actually 'feel' that 'not in control'. That's why virtue needs to be established beforehand, you must have been living restrained and keeping the precepts, because if you start undermining your own sense of self, your own point of view, which is all about control and mastery, well, you start undermining your sanity, very often, not always, but very often because that fear can overwhelm a person. However, it can't overwhelm you, if your behaviour has been purified beforehand.

By dwelling in the solitary environment, free from others, you actually get to see that whatever personality, whatever sense of self you have created in the course of this life, it's fully dependent upon this living operating organs of this body, that are on the level of trees, rocks, rivers, mountains, and so on. And when those things come to cease, these organs will also come to cease, they cannot possibly remain standing. So it's not a question of looking for a great epiphany or some great revelation of the hidden truth, it's a question of clarifying this very image, this very reflection, maintaining it and letting it endure, letting it exist peripherally (at the back of your mind so to speak) while you are doing other things. Establish your mind in it, because you're basically establishing your mind in non-appropriation, you're establishing your mind in the impossibility of appropriation.

“Suppose, bhikkhus, people were to carry off the grass, sticks, branches, and foliage in this Jeta’s Grove, or to burn them, or to do with them as they wish. Would you think: ‘People are carrying us off, or burning us, or doing with us as they wish?’”

“No, venerable sir. For what reason? Because, venerable sir, that is neither our self nor what belongs to our self.”

“So too, bhikkhus, form is not yours, feeling..., perception..., intentions..., consciousness is not yours: abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness.”-

[Sn22.33](#)

If you are in a forest, take a look at all the twigs and branches there, you don't think twice about them. If somebody were to ask, “Is this yours? Does this belong to you?” The answer is “No, of course not.” But if somebody were to ask you about your own body, you'd say, “Well, it is my body”, or you might stop and think about it, “...but it isn't mine, in the same manner, these objects around me aren't mine in this wilderness.” This circumstantial forest, your body, shares the same nature. None of this is yours and therefore that body cannot be yours because if it were yours, you would be in charge of your own heart, the way it beats, you could tell it to stop, you would be in charge of your own metabolism, your own lungs, brain, and so on. But you aren't. Any notion of control intentionality and choice that comes through it is

secondary, it's fully within the container of this given body. Which means when that given body ceases to be given to you, all the things that you do on account of it will not be able to stand anymore.

Seclusion, in order to stop identifying yourself, with people, with external sense of control with external sense of management, but instead, as a stepping back into something greater, something more accidental, something that cannot be conceived to be controlled. Such as wilderness, and then maintaining that image, that meaning. Not expecting a great bolt of lightning, giving you every answer to every single question. No, just maintaining that very setup, because that very setup will be puncturing the bubble of craving, and it will slowly bleed away. That's what I meant by non maintenance of it, you can't stop maintaining it overnight. But you set up an environment that prevents it, that cannot give rise to maintenance of craving of one's own appropriation. And that's how craving bleeds out, fades away, then even if you're with people afterwards, there will not be the re-induction of your own ignorance and your own appropriation.

These giant roots, massive rocks, huge banyan trees, great mountains, large rivers. All that is accidental, circumstantial. What is to be said about the blood flowing in this body, the heart pumping and the lungs breathing. Even the small trees and branches are more durable than this body, yet somehow this body is regarded as mine, as if it is in my control. It's not about denying your sense of control, it's about undermining it while it is still present, by seeing it as gratuitous.

There is me, there is this sense of I am, but you want to undermine it, by seeing it fully determined by that which cannot be yours. That's how your own sense of control ceases to be yours. That's how an arahant can still act, talk, choose, prefer, without actually owning anything, because he has fully surpassed and surmounted it. The only reason people appropriate things is because they don't fully understand that they cannot do so. I mean, I can say, "yes, this mountain is mine", but it's completely meaningless. It's even meaningless to me. I know it's meaningless, and there is no amount of self induced conviction that will make me believe "No, it is mine". It cannot be mine. I can say that "This planet earth is mine". Sure, but that statement is hollow, and it's not more hollow than saying that this body is mine. It isn't. It's absolutely on the same footing as the element of earth. And if that is discerned, then it will be equally meaningless for you to think that this body, this heart, these lungs, these senses are mine. And then there will be no problem left for you to deal with, because you have surmounted, let go of, extinguished the basis of all problems. You don't go around dealing with every single problem individually. You just uproot the necessary basis for all problems.
